

B.B. King is considered by most to be the king of the blues. Even if you don't consider this to be the case, there is no denying that his name is synonymous with the blues, and he has definitely influenced and exposed more people to that genre of music than anyone else. Grammy winning producers Bill Levenson and Andy McKaie have tackled the daunting task of compiling 60 years of his music into a new massive box set. Led Zeppelin is the most influential hard rock band in history. They broke up in 1980 after the death of drummer John Bonham, but reunited for Live Aid in 1985, and for Atlantic Records' 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration in 1988, with Bonham's son Jason filling in on drums. They were not happy with the results of those performances, so when it came time for the band to reunite for a concert in 2007 to honor Ahmet Ertegun, founder of Atlantic Records, who passed away in December 2006, the band rehearsed for six weeks before the concert. This concert is finally being released on video and audio, five years later, as Celebration Day. Black Country Communion keeps churning out an album each year, and the band has become a huge success in Europe, but singer / main songwriter Glenn Hughes says this may be their last album. Further comments from guitarist Joe Bonamassa indicate that the band's breakup is a strong possibility. This would be too bad, because their new album Afterglow may be their best yet.

## Ladies & Gentlemen...Mr. B.B. King



Riley King became B.B. King when his nickname Beale Street Blues Boy was shortened to B.B. while working at WDIA in Memphis in the 1940's. He first began recording in 1949 and his most recent album was released in 2008. At 87 years old, he still tours constantly, and come Dec. 31, he will have played 250 shows in 2012. He has recorded 50 albums, and the new career-spanning 194 song, 10 CD box set, Ladies & Gentlemen...Mr. B.B. King, draws from all of them. Two CDs are from his recordings on the Bullet, Modern/RPM and Kent/Crown labels, and eight CDs from his recordings on the ABC/Impulse/MCA/Geffen labels. The box set includes a 72 page silver gilded hard-bound book of liner notes, essays, discographical information and lots of great black and white photographs.

B.B. King's signature guitar tone is instantly recognizable, as is his huge voice. B.B. concentrates on his guitar playing and singing so much that he has never been able to do both simultaneously. When B.B. was growing up, his favorite day was Sunday, because he loved going to church where the pastor played a Sears Silvertone guitar, and B.B. loved singing hymns. B.B. was just as influenced by his aunt's extensive record collection, which included blues, rhythm & blues, jazz and country music (all genres of music that B.B. has recorded). B.B. started out playing gospel, but when he got to Memphis, he noticed that when he was playing for tips on Beale Street, passers-by would tell him "God bless you", while his contemporaries down the street playing blues were getting cash tips, so he decided that his cousin Bukka White was right in telling him that he needed to play the blues. B.B.'s mom died when he was young, but he always remembered that she taught him to treat people kind, and he was helpful and supportive in getting many musicians started, such as The Allman Brothers and Joe Bonamassa, who opened a show for B.B. King at age 13. A friend of mine was a guitar painter at Gibson Guitar in Memphis, and one day, B.B. King came to tour the factory. My friend was told to make painting the Gibson Lucille (B.B.'s signature model) look exciting. When he saw someone approach the window, my friend began flailing his free hand dramatically, while making a half figure eight with the hand holding the paint sprayer. He looked like he was sword fencing. The door to the paint booth flew open, and B.B. came in and gave him a big bear hug and told him "Boy, that's what we used to call putting on a show"! I believe that his good natured kindheartedness is part of why people are attracted to B.B. King, and it has played a large role in his immense success.

Before B.B. King played with his thick, clean guitar tone, he often played with a nasty, distorted tone. By nasty, I mean awesome. It makes it even cooler that many of these records were recorded right here in Memphis, some at the YMCA, and some at Memphis Recording Service (later re-named Sun Studio). These earlier recordings are my favorite of B.B. King's, and this box set does a great job of representing this part of B.B.'s legacy, and since it is compiled in chronological order, one can hear how B.B. developed his signature sound that was in full force by the time that he recorded *The Thrill Is Gone*, his most recognized hit, in 1970. B.B.'s earlier records were marketed to a black audience, and were released on independent, budget priced labels. Due to their affordability, these records found their way overseas, so all of the young British guitarists were able to find and afford B.B. King records. This is primarily how B.B. King's guitar playing became such a huge influence in rock music. The night that Eric Clapton and Jeff Beck met, they listened to B.B.'s 1965 album, *Live At The Regal*, on a tape player in Clapton's car (a rarity in that day and age). Two years later, Clapton would play with B.B. King for the first time while in Cream, and would go on to record an album with B.B. in 2000 (also represented on the box set). Beck eventually toured with B.B. in 2003. American rock bands were listening to B.B. King as well. Joe Walsh also cites the *Live At The Regal* album as a milestone influence, and he eventually played on B.B.'s *Indianola Mississippi Seeds*, released in 1970. This is B.B.'s personal favorite of his albums. There is no coincidence that standard rock guitar solos sound like B.B. King's guitar solos.

Ladies & Gentlemen...B.B. King really only scratches the surface of B.B.'s massive discography, but it gives the best overview available, and as good an overview as possible with the limitation of 10 CDs. The sound quality is excellent throughout the German-made set, and there is a good mix of studio and live recordings. For those who really love the early material, Ace Records from the U.K. has a fantastic four disc, 105 song box set called *The Vintage Years* that is highly recommended as well. For those that feel that 10 discs of B.B. King is overwhelming, there is an abbreviated four disc version of the box. The 10 disc version is an amazon.com exclusive for now, with only the 4 disc version appearing in stores.

## Led Zeppelin – Celebration Day



Led Zeppelin's three original members reunited, with drummer John Bonham's son Jason filling in on drums, for a single concert at the O2 Arena in London in December 2007. Twenty million people applied for tickets to the show, but only 18,000 worldwide lottery winners were able to attend. A friend of mine was one of the lucky 18,000, and his mini-review of the show to me was that for the first three songs, Jimmy Page played with an unusual guitar tone, and the band was great, but on the fourth song, when they played his favorite Led Zeppelin song, In My Time Of Dying, they took off to another level, and the rest of the concert was awesome. I wondered if he had just gotten caught up in the moment of hearing his favorite song, especially so early in the show, but this, in a nutshell, is exactly what happened.

For the first three songs on Celebration Day, Jimmy Page plays his signature Gibson Les Paul with a tone that is more Robin Trower than Led Zeppelin. It's not bad, it's just different. Page then straps on a Gibson ES-350 once owned by Chuck Berry and begins playing the opening slide guitar to In My Time Of Dying, and the tone sounds exactly like the original recording. Page notoriously used a Danelectro 59-DC guitar on this song live in the 70's, which made the Danelectro an instant collectible. Page plays the rest of the show with the tone and spirit of the original Led Zeppelin albums intact. His playing is nothing short of amazing, especially considering the concert had been delayed for two weeks because he had fractured the pinky finger on his left hand. Page said that if Django Reinhardt could play with two fingers, he could surely do it with three. Page's pinky is usually seen behind the neck of his guitar on this show, and I only saw it touch the fret board of his guitar twice, and only briefly the entire two hours. Every riff and solo that Page plays is fantastic, with the exception his solo in Stairway To Heaven, played on his double neck SG, which doesn't live up to the original. It is still a great performance of the song, so fans won't be disappointed at all.

Robert Plant's vocals are great throughout this concert. He knows his limitations, and he wisely stays within them. His vocals are always strong, clear and on key, and his range is surprisingly still very good. Plant clearly enjoys himself, and seems to especially enjoy the bluesiest songs. Plant has not ruled out further Led Zeppelin reunions, but he is the one that didn't want to tour after this show. It had the potential to be the biggest concert tour in history, but he undoubtedly does not need the money. Speculations are that his lower key solo roots music is less demanding than the high powered Led Zeppelin songs are, or that he simply enjoys branching out into other forms of music more than revisiting his past. At any rate, I wish that he would find a way to do both successfully.

John Paul Jones is the most overlooked member of Led Zeppelin, but he demonstrates his importance on this show. His bass playing is always dead on, but his keyboard playing on No Quarter and Trampled Under Foot is accurate to the original recordings, and he plays the bass notes on the keyboard simultaneously. He often has a huge grin on his face during this show. Perhaps this reunion took some of the sting out of Page/Plant not including him in their collaborations, especially the mid-90's Unledded tour, where they primarily played Led Zeppelin songs.

Jason Bonham had the most difficult job, according to Jimmy Page, in filling his dad's shoes on drums. John Bonham is regarded as one of the best rock drummers in history, and Jason, though good, is often inconsistent. He has a solo band, and has drummed for UFO and Foreigner, but his best playing has been as a member of Black Country Communion. Being a member of this Led Zeppelin reunion and studying his dad's drumming definitely paid off, and Bonham does indeed fill his dad's shoes admirably. He doesn't play exactly the same, but he captures the spirit, and there are points in the concert where the other three members look back at him and laugh, clearly enjoying his rising to the challenge.

Celebration Day had a limited release in the theater in October, and will be released on Blu-Ray, DVD, CD, Blu-Ray audio and download on November 19, 2012. The deluxe version of the video includes previously unseen rehearsal footage. A 3 LP vinyl version will be released on December 11, 2012. Celebration Day is an absolute must see for Led Zeppelin fans as well as any classic rock fans. If your only live Led Zeppelin experience is the mediocre at best The Song Remains The Same, you will no longer wonder why Led Zeppelin had the live reputation that they did. If you have seen the excellent concert DVDs simply titled Led Zeppelin, your reference will be in the stratosphere in comparison, but your jaw will still drop at how great this show is.

## Black Country Communion – Afterglow



Black Country Communion keeps turning out a great album every year. Afterglow is their third album, and it was recorded live in the studio in six days. Singer/bassist Glenn Hughes (former Trapeze & Deep Purple) wrote the songs after the band's 2011 summer tour, which resulted in the excellent Live Over Europe concert video and album. Hughes keeps a guitar in almost every room in his house, so he can pick one up and write a song at any time. He emailed basic demos to the rest of the band, and they got together in the studio in June of 2012 to complete and record the backing tracks. Hughes put the music on his iPad to listen to while he wrote the lyrics, returning to the studio in July to record

the vocals. The mixing and mastering of the album took longer than the actual recording, but it was worth it, as Afterglow is the best sounding of the three Black Country Communion albums.

Afterglow is in the same classic rock vein as Black Country Communion I & II are, but it is not quite as hard rocking as BCC II is. There are plenty of great rock guitar riffs throughout, but there are stronger and better melodies as a result in the downplay of the heavier music, and keyboardist Derek Sherinian is featured more than ever before. Joe Bonamassa says that a couple of songs from the second album were bordering on heavy metal, and he doesn't think that's the direction that the band should take. I agree with him, and I think that Afterglow is right where this band belongs. It fits into the style of early to mid-70's classic British rock, but it also sounds fresh and unique. Fans of Led Zeppelin and Deep Purple will love this album. Glenn Hughes, at age 61, still has his vocal range and incredibly powerful voice intact. He isn't nicknamed "The Voice of Rock" in Europe for nothing. Bonamassa's guitar playing is excellent, as always, and he uses an EchoPlex on the song Midnight Sun, most likely a nod to the late great Tommy Bolin, Deep Purple band mate and close friend of Hughes, who was a master of the effect.

Joe Bonamassa is the busiest member of Black Country Communion, and he continues to churn out top notch solo albums of his own (as well as collaborating with singer Beth Hart), and this is the source of the problems within the band. Glenn Hughes, who put his solo career on hold to concentrate on Black Country Communion in 2010, has stated that this may be the last Black Country Communion album, because he needs to be in a band that can tour on a regular basis. Bonamassa says that he loves playing in Black Country Communion, but that his solo touring schedule was no secret before this album was recorded. Bonamassa plays around 200 shows a year, and is booked through the spring of 2013. Drummer Jason Bonham has also commented that it is a shame that the band won't be able to tour in support of such a strong album. Hopefully, the band will be able to stay together, as there are very few current bands playing this style of music, and none doing it better than Black Country Communion.